

1-1-2012

Documentary Production & Documentary Problems

Shara K. Lange

East Tennessee State University, langes@etsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etsu-works>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Citation Information

Lange, Shara K.. 2012. Documentary Production & Documentary Problems. *Films for the Feminist Classroom*. Vol.4(1).
http://ffc.twu.edu/issue_4-1.html

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETSU Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

Documentary Production & Documentary Problems

Copyright Statement

This document was published with permission by the journal. It was originally published in the *Films for the Feminist Classroom*.

Films for the Feminist Classroom

Journal Issue 4.1

Spring-Summer 2012

Edited by Agatha Beins, Jillian Hernandez, and Deanna Utroske

Editorial Assistant: A.J. Barks

Editorial Intern: Vera Hinsey

Documentary Production & Documentary Problems

By Shara K. Lange

Perhaps what I do is throw the party: I send out invitations, I blow up balloons, I rent the karaoke machine. I bake the cake.

As Parker Palmer writes in, *The Courage to Teach*, "Good teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young, and hospitality is always an act that benefits the host even more than the guest" (2007, 51).

How much credit the class I teach, my teaching, or the exercise I write about here deserves for the best student work, I can't say, but when the work is excellent I am profoundly impressed by students' bravery, sincerity, and intelligence. This was true of Cory Pratt's team who made the documentary, *This is Kevin*, a compassionate, insightful portrait of a transgender man in East Tennessee. Students in Monterrey, Mexico, made forthright documentaries that confronted social issues in their communities: a scintillating thesis documentary, *Porque Podemos* (Because We Can) offered much-needed role models of proactive individuals in their communities and a film about a murdered student caught in the cross fire of Mexican drug cartels provided solace to a distressed community. During a study abroad program in Prague, a young woman talked about her deceased mother in a personal documentary and filmed the day she began spreading her mother's ashes in the Vltava River at dawn.

The documentary filmmaking process lends itself to these kinds of connections for a broad range of students. And when instruction seems to resonate, as all teachers know, it is a satisfying and humbling experience.

*

Making documentary films forces students to engage in the complexities of the genre. They must work simultaneously to master the technical issues of the craft while struggling to cultivate their own voices in the stories they tell. I find that documentary filmmaking engages students deeply, fosters a kind of profound, personal media literacy, and successfully captures the elusive attention of digital natives. Along with the standard timeless preoccupations of college students (love, sex, identity, the future), these days they are further distracted from their class work by social media, text messages and

the omnipresent promise of some kind of virtual stimulus just within their reach. But students recognize that documentary is contemporary and relevant. They are media savvy (though not necessarily literate), multitask, and respond positively to the genre's nimble ability to integrate a broad continuum of high and low, serious and trivial.

In the graduate/undergraduate level class I teach, Documentary Research and Production, students watch documentaries to inform their filmmaking in terms of content (subject, theme) and in terms of craft (writing, editing, directing, etc.). The exercise accompanying this essay, "Issues & Formal Analysis in Documentary Film Production," is designed to expose students to a wide range of documentary films and to encourage them to engage with various "problems" in the form. These problems represent challenges for a viewer or a filmmaker planning an approach to a film, but they also represent what is most fascinating about the genre: the complex ideas of representation at play, the form's situation at the intersection of art and philosophy, documentary's struggle to respond to its history and society, and the irresolvable, perpetually shifting idea of "the real" make it a rich area for study.

Class Assignment: Issues & Formal Analysis in Documentary Film Production

Documentary Research and Production is an upper-level undergraduate and graduate level class, so I expect students to synthesize a significant amount of material in a short period of time. Pairs of students are assigned a group of two or three documentaries that relate to a particular theme and related readings, including interviews with several filmmakers. They must watch and research the films, and then they present the films, their research, and their analysis of the readings to the class using PowerPoint and film clips. The themes represent key issues in documentary film such as problems of representation, truth, and ethical issues involved in making documentaries. I chose these themes because they are recurring and significant in documentary filmmaking. Because I was after variety in terms of content, form, and the date of production, I chose films to represent a mix of historically significant, seminal documentaries and new, contemporary films. When I put together this assignment, I thought it would be great to include, *Stranger with a Camera*, for example, because it was made in Appalachia, the region where I teach.

I choose to have the students present this exercise, "Issues & Formal Analysis in Documentary Film Production," to the class in order to encourage dialogue and to expose students to a broad range of films, reference materials, and ideas in a short period of time. The class is focused on production, so we address the issues raised in the exercise in a cursory, efficient matter. "Issues & Formal Analysis in

Documentary Film Production," is a short assignment relative to the series of production-oriented assignments that students complete during the course of the semester, concluding with the completion of a ten-minute documentary. Were a student to develop an honor's or graduate thesis from their work in, Documentary Research and Production, as has happened in the past, they would be able to delve more deeply into the subject matter covered with this exercise. A class that did not also cover film or video production would have significantly more time and room to further explore these profound areas.

The exercise, "Issues & Formal Analysis in Documentary Film Production," could easily be modified for applications in other classes. For example, my students do presentations, but students in other kinds of courses could use the same framework to write papers. I have students work in teams, but this could be an individual assignment. I assign a different set of films to each team, but an entire class could focus on one set of films and related issues. The "Readings/Additional Screenings" could be developed, and each group of films could be the subject of an entire class period, facilitated by students or instructors, as appropriate. This assignment covers a vast range of content that could be culled for a specific class. Among the issues addressed are how war is represented, representation of African Americans, truth claims, gender, the power of the image maker, and ethnographic film. Moreover, the lesson plan's framework could be adopted, and other groups of films adopted, with additional resources, including films, articles, filmmaker interviews, and book chapters that students research themselves.

I have taught this exercise only once and because it fits within traditional academic realms, as opposed to shooting and editing video, for example, it requires reading, writing, and research skills that lower-level undergraduate students may not have practiced as extensively. So, I have found that the grad students and the upper-level undergrads tend to do better with this assignment. Because of the function this exercise in the larger context of my video-production class, I think they still get a lot out of it, even if they aren't as successful with this particular assignment. Therefore, when crafting and presenting such an activity it can be useful to consider the student body of the university as well as the broader curriculum of a particular program.

Documentaries, along with their step-cousins (inexpensively produced reality TV programming) represent fantastic opportunities to discuss our attraction to "the real" and the fact that films and television are constructions (things that someone has made) that warrant a viewer's suspicion. To help examine truth claims along with the screenings and the readings, the following could be helpful in a classroom setting:

--What is a documentary? Have the class discuss different definitions by various authors (e.g., Barry Hampe, Michael Rabiger) and filmmakers (e.g., John Grierson, Werner Herzog).

--Read and discuss Werner Herzog's piece "Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema" and compare it to the essay by Bill Nichols, "What to Do about Documentary Distortion? Toward a Code of Ethics." What responsibility does a filmmaker have to his/her audience?

--Discuss the various techniques that filmmakers use to construct films including recording and performing voiceover narration, scripting and directing reenactments, and the employment of continuity editing, as well as the multiple possible uses of interviews, graphics/animation, and archival materials.

--Discuss the various styles that documentary filmmakers use to approach subjects (reflexive, observational, impressionistic, etc.). Consider the diverse styles of Nick Broomfield, Errol Morris, Barbara Koppel, among others.

I strongly believe that students need to find their own subjects to explore with their films and that having an idea, executing it and making decisions about how to do so is the crux of what is important and valuable for students in this process. However, students don't necessarily realize that there are issues of power when you make films. It is helpful for student filmmakers to consider Laura Mulvey's ideas about the male gaze and to think about Agnes Varda's work. Considering the male gaze could affect the subject choice a student will make, or even the camera angle used in an interview. Likewise, our medium has always reflected issues of class, and the study of ethnographic film helps illustrate this. There is a long history of people with the means of production (cameras, plane tickets, and editing systems) making films about people who don't have any means of production. The resulting inequality in terms of existing films made by and about various communities (people of color, women, people in developing countries, low-income communities) is an important issue to consider that could affect the style of the filmmaker and should inform a wide range of decisions he or she will make, from subject, to shooting style and editing.

More and more we take image making and taking for granted. My goal is not to inhibit students who are learning to express their ideas via this medium, but rather to help them understand their work as part of a larger context within the continuum of audio-visual history. They will better employ the images they create the more they understand the history, subtext, and power of their medium.

I am passionate about documentary films and their many virtues, as cultural artifacts, as pieces of art, as sites for negotiating ideas and identities, as commentary, as entertainment and more. As a filmmaker, I love that documentaries are rebels that change form, sometimes experimental, sometimes

narrative, sometimes journalistic. I love that they are underdogs--that a great story can trump a great budget. I love that when it comes down to it, it is very difficult to delineate the form's rules or even the definition of documentary film and that these parameters change all of the time with each new generation of filmmakers. For students, this is exciting, empowering, and true to their experiences. Guided exposure, engagement, and discussion of these slippery areas helps our students to develop as filmmakers, to become stronger students, and to better navigate these times.

Works Cited

Hampe, Barry. 1997. *Making Documentary Films and Reality Videos: A Practical Guide to Planning, Filming, and Editing Documentaries of Real Events*. New York: Holt.

Herzog, Werner. 1999. "Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema." <http://www.wernerherzog.com/52.html>.

Mulvey, Laura. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16(3) Autumn: 6-18.

Nichols, Bill. 2006. "What to Do about Documentary Distortion? Toward a Code of Ethics." *International Documentary Association*. March/April. <http://www.documentary.org/content/what-do-about-documentary-distortion-toward-code-ethics-0>.

Palmer, Parker J. 2007. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rabiger, Michael. 2009. *Directing the Documentary*. 5th ed. Oxford: Focal Press.

Shara K. Lange is assistant professor and head of the Radio/TV/Film Program at East Tennessee State University. She completed her MFA in film production at the University of Texas at Austin. Her thesis documentary about North African immigrant women in southern France, *The Way North*, premiered at the Arab Film Festival in San Francisco in 2008 and is distributed by Third World Newsreel in New York City. In 2007, she was awarded a Fulbright grant to shoot the documentary, *The Dressmakers*, in Morocco. She also worked as associate producer on the independently produced, PBS broadcast documentary about declining marine fisheries, *Empty Oceans, Empty Nets*.